

The Third Sunday After Pentecost • July 3, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 11:25-30

"Patriotic"

It's both ironic and appropriate that one of the best-loved and most-recognized icons of the United States of America isn't actually native to our land. Standing tall on a pedestal on her island in New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty has served as a beacon of hope and freedom for millions of people since her dedication almost 125 years ago. Travelers from all around the world have come to this nation with the desire to live out life the way that it is meant to be lived. Within the Statue of Liberty's pedestal, there's a bronze plaque marked with these words: "*Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*" This passage, from Emma Lazarus' sonnet "The New Colossus," helped to cement the Statue of Liberty's identity as a herald of freedom and as an entry point into a new life. This invitation and the reality behind it have shaped the history of our nation. So as our country celebrates its birthday this holiday weekend, consider Jesus' words from our Gospel text in Matthew 11: "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*" As people who would follow Jesus through this Fourth of July, **what does it mean to be truly patriotic?**

In America, it's hard to think about being patriotic without images of red, white, and blue popping up. Stars and stripes abound – especially this weekend as people go to parades and wave flags, or watch amazing displays of fireworks exploding in the night sky. But being patriotic is, of course, more than once-a-year displays, more than wearing a pin on your jacket or flying a flag at your home. Looking at the word itself tells us something: "patriotic" (and its noun form, "patriot") traces its origin to the Greek word for "father," πατήρ. It might sound a little old-fashioned to call our country the "fatherland," but that's kind of what patriotism is about: a devotion to the land and family that is your home.

In that reading from Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus thanking God the Father –that same word (πατήρ) in the original Greek of the New Testament – for the Father's work in the world through His Son. But Jesus isn't talking about how God is revealing His love through other people. No, Jesus is saying that only the Son truly knows the Father, so people can't know the Father unless the Son reveals Him to them, unless He opens their eyes. Jesus, God the Son, has a unique relationship with His Father. No matter who you are, Christ alone can make that connection. The people who think themselves wise and worthy only distance themselves from God. He hides Himself from their sight. Rather, it's the little children to whom the Father makes Himself known. Jesus' casting people as "little children" isn't pointing to biological age or even childlike trust in faith; rather, these "little children" are as infants: the people to whom God reveals Himself through the Son are insufficient and unable to come to God. They cannot immigrate to that land where the Father awaits. They, along with us, have only need for what the Father can give, and nothing else. Truly *patriotic* life is life lived in relationship with our Father in heaven, and Jesus alone makes that possible.

Now before we get too far along here, we need to make sure we understand an essential component of what it really means to be patriotic. People can get caught up in passion for our country, like a fan of the home team. You might feel a rush when you hear a marching band play "Stars and Stripes Forever" or see a presidential inauguration down on the Mall. You might shed a tear in times of national tragedy, or be concerned for the proper exercise of government at the local and national levels. And at a glance that might seem to be what being patriotic is all about, but it's not. **Patriotism isn't emotion, it's action. More specifically, it is living in service to others, a self-giving service that is based in one's relationship with their fatherland.** In the history of our

nation, true patriots have given of themselves for the welfare of their fellow Americans, offering up their time and energy, their wealth – even their lives – because they believed in the promise of country where people could know freedom. They put their care for their country into action. In the secular world, if someone were to merely sit around and complain about the state of the nation without taking action to fix it, we couldn't call that patriotic behavior: it's just poor citizenship. If you truly want to serve your country in some way, you must put that desire into action in the world around you. As Christians, you and I are called to serve very important roles for the well-being of our fellow Americans.

While its founding may have been informed by Judeo-Christian values, America is not a "Christian nation." It's more accurate to say that this is a nation that is home to a number of Christians, perhaps even the majority of the population at the moment. But if you and I mean to be truly patriotic citizens of this country, our identity as followers of Christ must inform our patriotic living. We can't just rest on the past history of our country and think that things have to go back to being the way we might have imagined they were once before, where people seemed to identify as "Christian." If we want to live out patriotic service for our nation, we must first serve our community and our neighbor – how can we be serving the country if we are not serving the individuals who constitute the country? And the best service that we can give is in sharing the message of the Father's love for his creation through Jesus.

Thank back to Jesus' words in our Gospel text, and consider how **Jesus' life and death were the most patriotic that this world will ever know, because he acted in service based in his relationship with the Father.** God the Son came to earth to reveal the Father to us "little children," to carry out the mission that would bring freedom to his people. Motivated by a desire to defend that people – not any one country or earthly nation, but all those that he makes his own, including you and me – Jesus went to the cross to give up his life in loving service for all his Father's children. Giving himself up to death on the cross, he defeated the enemy powers that would hold us captive and kill us. And through his sacrifice in the Father's mission, he won the ultimate victory. Jesus' people can know forgiveness and freedom in the Father's land.

Here in this passage, Jesus calls you and me to take up his yolk and learn from him. Picture what it means to be linked to Jesus. Being linked to him, following where he leads you, is not a heavy burden, but a gift that makes it possible to live out life the way that it is meant to be lived. He carried the burden of our sin – of all sin – on the cross. His self-giving service, action based on his relationship with the father, brings rest, peace, and freedom for all this weary world. **Jesus is the ultimate patriot.**

As someone yoked to Christ's life, death, and resurrection, all of your vocations become patriotic. Knowing the Father's love through Jesus, you are a citizen of a country that knows no geographical limitations. You have heard the Son's call to serve. And you are sent to each person in your community to touch their life through self-giving action that reflects this Jesus to whom you are linked. The patriotic Christian doesn't look to change the world; instead, we share the message of a living Savior who transforms lives – and in doing so, changes the world one life at a time.

The Statue of Liberty has been an enduring symbol of the freedom of life we enjoy here in America. But as we have ourselves have heard, Jesus stands as a beacon to all the weary nations, inviting them to become his people, to experience the freedom that comes through him. The ultimate patriot, Jesus calls the world to know true peace in him, to be at home in the Father's land. In him, you will find rest for your soul.

Amen.